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Gillard and gender: has she been vindicated?

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

I am a cofounder of the feminist action group Destroy the Joint; am an active feminist in my personal life; and am a UTS academic in journalism and social media. I also give lectures at UTS on social media activism, including the story of Destroy the Joint, applying the theories of Manuel Castells.



In recent days, prime minister Julia Gillard has been accused of overplaying the 'gender card'. AAP/Tony McDonough

In a room full of feminists, there was hardly a sympathetic word in the room for prime minister Julia Gillard on Tuesday night.

Earlier that day, the prime minister had launched Women for Gillard with a **stinging exposition** on the gender equality shortcomings of a future under a Coalition government.

But these 200 women, congregating to celebrate the publication of the anthology *Destroying the Joint*, were not enthusiastic. The immediate response to the prime minister's message that a Coalition government would exclude women

from public life and make abortion “the political plaything of men” was cynical: of course abortion rights would never be infringed. On what evidence was the prime minister saying the Coalition would exclude women?

Just 24 hours later, at least some of the women in that room knew they’d been wrong. Very wrong. A day later, the mood is quite different. Here’s why: it took the publication of **one “joke” menu** for a fundraiser for Liberal candidate Mal Brough to make the difference.

In the meantime, the author of the “joke” has denied it was ever made public, but the ABC’s senior social media journalist Latika Bourke says Mal Brough **confirmed its existence** to her early yesterday.

The menu used the prime minister’s body parts to make fun of her. Her thighs. Her breasts. And her vagina.

All sexism needs to be viewed in context and with evidence and the prime minister has evidence.

There is absolutely no way that anyone would be offered a menu with rilette de sausage de John Howard or meatballs of Paul Keating. Vulgar. Stupid. I’m sorry I’m even writing it – but it is just so show you the comparison of ugliness.

So, menus aside, what is the substance of the prime minister’s claims on a putative Coalition government?

Let’s look at abortion first – since that’s the one which has attracted the highest level of disbelief. I asked National Foundation for Australian Women’s Marie Coleman, now 80 and a longtime activist for reproductive rights, whether she thought Gillard was scaremongering.

Women of my age have direct experience of the time...when many GPs would refuse to provide contraceptive advice to an unmarried woman, when abortion was illegal under every state or territory law, when death from septicaemia was common after a botched backyard abortion, when there was no sole parent benefit, and when adoption or a shotgun marriage was the choice for the unwed pregnant girl unable to obtain an abortion.

But surely that’s unlikely now?

My take is that while abortion is funded through Medicare it remains a federal issue. Women already find it tough in states where abortion is a criminal matter. But we also have to recognise that the Commonwealth finances medical procedures and pharmaceutical benefits, so to suggest that the prime minister overreaches on this issue is plain stubbornness. Worse, it’s ignoring the facts.

And Coleman is concerned that the campaign against abortion will begin – has begun – with our international obligations. That we will link international aid to funding clinics which don’t promote reproductive choice. She also says there are concerted campaigns to remove funding for sex-selection abortion from Medicare.

This is an Australian version of an on-going international campaign against all abortion rights, which cherry-picks sections from various United Nations Conventions and Instruments- international conventions to which Australia as a nation is a signatory.

When you replay opposition leader Tony Abbott’s comments of just seven years ago, you need to view them in context (yes, I keep coming back to that). When he says abortion should be “safe and rare”, we all agree with safe. But how rare can it be? How will that be enforced if the Coalition have the balance of power in the Senate?

Speaking of Senates – and of parliament in general – will women be excluded from public life?

We can’t speak for the future because we never know what tricks fate will play on us – but if you look at **the evidence collected by Greens analyst Ben Raue**, the Greens are the party of choice if you want to vote for a party with diversity. More women, more women candidates, more often.

I’m stealing Raue’s excellent work here but in short, there’s 113 men in the House of Representatives and 37 women, of whom only 14 are Liberals, including three Queensland LNP members and one Country Liberal from the Darwin area. Raue

writes:

Every single National MP (including those LNP members who sit with the Nationals) is a man, while the seven other crossbench MPs are all men. 32.4% of the Labor caucus are women, compared to 19.4% of the Coalition joint party room.

The Senate is better but not great. The ALP has more women Senators than men; the Liberal Party's senators are mainly men. The Nationals don't have any women in the lower house.

The Socialist Alliance has the most women candidates. But I'm not sure that many of us can make that political journey.

These are the facts of the matter; and the context in which they exist. I'm sure the prime minister is looking for ways to lever herself out of what looks like a shocking situation for a politician.




But just because she's desperate, doesn't mean she's wrong.

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